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Tips for Library and Information Science Students Seeking Employment and Entering the Workforce

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Introduction

I graduated from Emporia State University with my MLIS degree in summer, 2005, and intended to become a cataloger in an academic library. Since I did not have a job waiting for me when I graduated, I began to think about ways to deal with the situation. After completing a demanding degree program I wanted to rest as much as I could because once I found a library job I knew I would be busy. For the first couple of weeks, then, I took it easy. During that time, however, I was still busy sending out job applications for cataloging positions and I also explored other options like volunteering. In what follows, I will discuss my experience in volunteer work and as a temporary solo librarian and I will share some tips that helped me in time management and in being successful as a new librarian.

Volunteer Experience

My first tip for library and information science students about to graduate without solid job prospects is to consider volunteering. As a volunteer, you can practice many of the library skills and use the knowledge that you acquired during your course work. Being determined to secure a cataloging position, I had searched vigorously for a suitable job and sent out numerous applications. To enhance my resume, I needed to acquire relevant experience to make my application more attractive. Not waiting for paid employment, then, in October 2005, I started cataloging as a volunteer at the Flint Hills Technical College Library in Emporia, Kansas. As it turned out, my supervisor, the solo librarian at the College, asked me if I could substitute as the librarian while she was on temporary leave. The opportunity sounded challeng-

ing and beneficial for me. The librarian explained that the work would involve library instruction, cataloging, answering reference questions by phone and in-person, attending committee meetings, and writing tutorials to help students learn Microsoft Office and other technological and research skills. I was very pleased that the librarian entrusted me with this responsibility, and I accepted the new temporary position. It was in this position that I learned firsthand the importance and execution of good time management. This expressed itself as the tricky act of multi-tasking and seeking balance in life, as Izzy Gesell points out.¹

What most solo librarians do, whether they are school media specialists or librarians at special libraries or college libraries, is multitasking. Answering reference phone calls, typing emails and responding to one-on-one questions from faculty or students can at times occur simultaneously. The Flint Hills Technical College library, like any library these days, had several computers. I was frequently called upon to help students find resources or in using the computer itself. The beginning of the semester was always busy with library instruction classes. Taking care of the catalog database was also the librarian's responsibility. There were always other time pressures as well—to offer assistance and to make resources available in a timely way. To do this, I cataloged and processed the books and videos as quickly as possible. While some technical colleges may have librarian assistants who can do processing, more often than not the solo librarian picks up these tasks. Librarians in small college libraries often are required to write reports, write for publication, and to participate in college-wide committees. How does one find time for all this? The key is effective time management. Being successful in this type of environment comes down to how well we understand and handle our work, our leisure time and

personal time, and how well we organize our daily activities.

When I accepted this temporary position not only did I need to do the job required of me at the library, and do it well, but I still had to strive to meet my goal of finding a full-time cataloging position while attending to the needs for my own overall well being. It was a challenging time but I believe, overall a successful time. Here are some tips that really helped me be a success in this volunteer position.

Stay Healthy

Take care of your own physical and mental well-being. A healthy mind and healthy body play a most important role in your work and in your leisure time. I would get up around five in the morning and devote about 20 minutes to breathing and stretching exercises. This short routine really helped me to stay alert and energetic throughout the day. Since I had to leave around 6:45 a.m. to catch the shuttle bus, it was too early for me to have breakfast at home, so I usually carried breakfast and lunch with me. In the midst of my work, I would also try to take a five to ten minute break for a nice snack. We all know food makes us happy, so eat something that you like. Fortified this way, when you are back at the desk you will do your job well and finish in time. After work, I made a practice of going for a 30 minute to one-hour walk either with a friend or sometimes by myself. That walk usually served as my time for reflection. I would think about what had to be done the next day and how to prepare for reference instruction classes. Individuals often have their own preferences in exercise – going to gym, taking a run, bike riding, dance practice, or what have you. Do something rejuvenating for the mind and body – this relieves stress. Try different things then stick to something you enjoy most.

Another important factor in being healthy is avoiding worry. As human beings, we encounter or experience certain unpleasant situations that make us unhappy. It can be very stressful when you keep worrying about something and this can affect your work performance, among other things. Stress management continues to be an important consideration in the profession-

al literature of business and education. A key point often made is that since stress cannot be entirely avoided, it needs to be controlled and managed.² As much as possible, avoid worries and keep yourself engaged in positive activities such as leisure reading, helping others, spending time with your family or friends, watching a funny movie or TV show. Spend some 10 to 15 minutes alone; this can be very relaxing. I had the habit of sitting by the window having a cup of warm tea watching passers-by, or the birds, or even just thinking about how things went that day. Try to get sufficient sleep so that the next day you will have the energy to handle the day's work and its myriad activities. Since I got up early on workdays, I was able to avoid rushing to work or being late, and then was able to ease myself into a full daily schedule. Generally, if you have a healthy mind and a healthy body you can better cope with stress and manage your time successfully.

Be Determined

In my case, I was determined to secure a position as cataloger in an academic library. This first led to the volunteer position that then developed into a temporary cover position as the College librarian. Things tend to fall into place once you begin to take action. In some cases, however you need to try several options before you achieve success. This is natural and commonplace these days. In the process, it is important to never lose heart and give up.

The need for determination does not end when you secure work. Remember to exhibit it continuously. Since I did not have a car when I began work at the College library I looked into the options through public transportation. In order to be at work around eight in the morning I had to take the earliest bus. Although it was winter on the prairies, the cold did not deter me. After overcoming the challenges of getting to work, once there I was bent upon doing a full day's work that included not only the tasks expected of me, but also regularly tackling the cataloging backlog. I was determined that before the permanent librarian returned, all the resources that needed cataloging would be done. Each day I allocated time in the afternoon for this and

at closing time, I was rewarded with a clear sense of fulfillment.

It was important for me to avoid a situation where I needed to get another part-time job or needed to work on weekends. On another front, then, I needed to be determined not to take on too much and become overextended. Research shows that at some point, taking on more and more becomes counterproductive. In the United States, working any time and all the time has become something of a habit. A 2009 survey by the Society for Human Resource Management found that 70 % of American employees work beyond their scheduled time and on weekends, and more than half cite “self-imposed pressure” as the reason. The study goes on to suggest that some workers have reached the point where a paradoxical truth applies—to get more done, we need to stop working so much.³

Stay Focused

When you get that first job, even as a volunteer, it is important to stay focused. I would make a list of what work I had to accomplish in a day and in a week. As Professor Chris Palmer at American University advises, “Put your goals in writing. Without written goals, your life is essentially drifting without focus. Goals turn your dreams into reality.”⁴ Once you have identified your short-term and long-term goals, then plan and prioritize accordingly. Since cataloging was my “must-do” priority, I allocated time in the afternoon for this task. One should allocate time according to their work priorities, then after prioritizing, focus on the particular task you are working, then move on to the next.

For me it was important to find a permanent cataloging job, so this also was a priority, but one that could not interfere with my temporary position. Accordingly, I would spend some time later in the evening to search for jobs and send out applications (in the midst of my other domestic chores). On occasion, I needed to schedule phone interviews when I was at work, but I made sure these were conducted only during lunchtime. It is important not to let the distractions of such interviews detract from the day’s duties and activities in the workplace.

Another excellent way to stay focused at work is, toward the end of workday, when you have about 20 minutes before leaving, write down in sequence what tasks need to be completed the next day. This will help you begin the tasks at hand the next day. Also, use some of the last few minutes in the day to reflect on the tasks completed, how well they have been performed and what could have been done better or more efficiently.

Take Ownership

I highly recommend that librarians foster a sense of ownership over the duties and responsibilities of the position as much as possible. Think of the library as if it belongs to you and take care of it like the way you take care of your house or some private business. The point here is not to become “possessive” but to become more responsible. This will help in identifying and prioritizing what needs to be done daily, weekly, and monthly. In my case, the librarian left the library in my hands so it was my responsibility to manage it well. Since this was my first job in the profession, and being “in charge”, I was very excited at the opportunity. I quickly realized that once I opened the doors, it became my responsibility that everything runs well and that services to the students were delivered according to their needs, that the library looked clean and tidy, and that the computers were in good working order. It was always my objective, by the end of the day, to lock the doors and leave the library with a sense of accomplishment. Sometimes things can and will go wrong, but again, taking ownership also means rising to these challenges and preventing such glitches as much as possible.

Be Positive

As human beings, we all have “low” times emotionally, but it is important not to let negative emotions govern your behavior at work. As professionals, we need to overcome the temptation of letting the “blues” take over. While it is important to deal with those emotions, as much as possible deal with them privately, or if of a serious nature, seek professional help outside the workplace. In fact, many workplaces have “employee assistance programs” to help in these

situations. Know what is available in this regard, if negative emotions become a problem for you.

As a librarian, especially in a leadership position, even if it is temporary, it is imperative to be friendly, courteous and helpful to all who enter the library, and to ensure they leave as satisfied customers. While it is important to know when to say "no", it is also important to be helpful and accommodating to library users and patrons who come to you for assistance. It is better to be realistic about what you can reasonably accomplish than to take on too much and have disappointing results. If you are busy when students ask for assistance, tell them when you will have time and ask if they can wait, or set up an appointment. In my situation, occasionally international students would stop by to see if I could check their academic papers. As I always enjoyed doing this, there were times I would take their papers home for review. The deciding factor in these cases was whether I considered this work or leisure. For the international students, it was leisure. Not becoming overburdened, managing your time well, and distinguishing between work and leisure activities all helped me maintain a positive attitude. Staying positive and optimistic goes a long way in reducing stress and accomplishing both your short term and long-term goals.

In short, library and information science students and newly degreed librarians facing or entering the workforce will encounter a number of challenges. As one who recently went through the search process and successfully completed a volunteer position and then a temporary appointment as a college librarian, I offer a few tips to those who are on this path, or about to begin. Simply put, volunteer if the situation arises; stay healthy; be determined; stay focused; take ownership; be positive. In the process, you will develop excellent time management skills that will see you through to a successful and rewarding career in librarianship.

Endnotes

¹ Izzy Gresell, "Time Travel: the Myth Behind the Allure of Multitasking," *The Journal for Quality and Participation* 30 (2007): 22. Accessed 12/2/2010. <http://proquest.umi.com/>.

² Urskaa Treven and Sonja Treven, "Stress Management in Educational Organizations," *Journal of American Academy of Business* 16 (2011): 256-257. Accessed January 26, 2011. <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=2210001331&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=1449&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.

³ Sue Shellenbarger, "If You Need to Work Better, Maybe Try Working Less," *The Wall Street Journal* (September 23, 2009): 1. Accessed January 26, 2011. <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1864250951&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=1449&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.

⁴ Chris Palmer, "Best Practices: How to Increase Your Productivity," *Real Screen* 12 (2008): 12. Accessed on January 26, 2011. <http://proquest.umi.com/pqdweb?did=1498548921&sid=2&Fmt=3&clientId=1449&RQT=309&VName=PQD>.